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AUTHOR Johannessen, Larry R.
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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that one way teachers can revitalize literature studies in classrooms and foster students' response to literature is by teaching the literature of the Vietnam War. The paper presents some typical student responses to some Vietnam War literature, which stand in striking contrast to student responses to other kinds of literature. The paper then focuses on some Vietnam War literature appropriate for classroom use and offers some ways teachers might want to go about teaching it. The paper explores why this literature can have such a powerful impact on students. A 37-item bibliography and a 30-item selected annotated bibliography of the literature of the Vietnam War are included. An appendix contains student responses to the books they have read as well as to the documentary film (called "Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam") that they have been shown; and a set of handouts that provide teaching activities (including writing activities) are also attached. (RS)

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Fostering Response to Literature with the Literature of the Vietnam War

Larry R. Johannessen
Assistant Professor of English

Saint Xavier University
3700 West 103rd Street
Chicago, Illinois 60655

Telephone: (312) 298-3236
Fax: (312) 779-9061

Mailing Address:
1253 Reading Court
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

for
Second Annual Conference for Secondary English Teachers
West Suburban Writing Consortium
at
College of DuPage
22nd and Lambert Road
Glen Ellyn, Illinois 60137

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Fostering Student Response to Literature with the Literature of the Vietnam War

by

Larry R. Johannessen

for

Second Annual Conference on Writing

sponsored by the

West Suburban Writing Consortium

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Glen Ellyn, Illinios, February 26, 1993

Most of us here today would probably agree that one of our goals in teaching literature is that it will have a profound impact on students, that it will move them, that it will be more than a book they have to read for class, and more than an intellectual exercise they do in school. In short, we hope that our students will come to care about literature as much as we do. However, if your teaching experiences have been at all like mine, especially in the last few years, then you know what I mean when I say that too often the literature we ask our students to read seems to have very little impact, positively or negatively, on them. And, it doesn't seem to matter whether we ask them to read one of the great classics, such as *Macbeth,* or one of the more modern and seemingly high interest works aimed at teenagers, such as S. E. Hinton's, *The Outsiders.* The results are often the same: disappointing. Often the only reaction our students have to this literature is one of relief when the the task is done, relief that they are now free get back to the really

important things in their lives, such as clothes, cars, MTV, social activities, and, of course, their friends.

What can we do to make literature come alive for our students? I want to suggest to you that one way we can revitalize literature study in our classrooms and foster our students' response to literature is by teaching the literature of the Vietnam War. In a moment, I'm going to show you how students typically respond to some Vietnam War literature. I think you will see how the responses stand in striking contrast to the typical student reaction to literature that I just described. After examining student responses to Vietnam War literature, I'm going to focus on some Vietnam War Literature you might want to use with your classes, and also show you some classroom tested ways you might want go about teaching it. Along the way, I'm going to try explain why this literature can have such a powerful impact on students, and how teaching this literature fosters students' responses to literature. Finally, I'm going to provide you with a selected and annotated bibliography of some of the most teachable Vietnam War literature that you might want to try in your own classrooms.

Response to the Literature of the Vietnam War

Many teachers who have taught the literature of the Vietnam War report that student response always goes beyond their expectations (Carter, 1989 and 1991; Endress, 1984; Johannessen, 1992; Kroll, 1992; Mandel 1988; and Oldham, 1986). Let me just give you a few examples of how some of my students have responded to this literature, and talk a little about what these responses reveal.

If you will turn to the first two pages of your handout (Appendix B, pp. 37-38), I'd like to show you some excerpts from student written responses after studying different works that deal with the Vietnam War. The first one was written in response to Mark Baker's oral history *Nam* (1981). (Read student response.) Notice that this student had studied the Vietnam War in history, but that reading this particular work gave him new insight into what the war was like for the soldiers who fought in Vietnam.

The next seven responses are all excerpts from compositions students wrote in response to the documentary film, *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* (1986). (Read responses.) Notice the rather remarkable diversity of reactions to the film--everything from thanking a Vietnam Veteran (response #1) to the realization that war, any war, is simply a waste (response #7).

Finally, the last student response is to one of the more realistic, combat novels to come out of the war, James Webb's *Fields of Fire* (1978). (Read response.) Notice that reading the novel helped this student overcome some of his John Rambo myths about the war, and notice how the student openly talks about how engaging the work was.

These students clearly learned some important lessons about the war from studying this literature; yet, what each learned is as much, or perhaps more, a powerful affective response as it is intellectual. These few samples of student responses are a testament to the potential impact that the best literature of the Vietnam War can have on our students.

Student Interest and Response

There are a number of reasons why students have such powerful responses to this literature. One important reason is that students are interested in learning about the war (Christie, 1989; Johannessen, 1990, 1992, & in press). The strongest evidence for this conclusion is that since 1989 a number of works dealing with the war have ranked in the top selections of Young Adults' Choices list in the International Reading Association's annual national survey of middle, junior high, and senior high school students (1989, 1990, 1991). In addition, at the college level, courses dealing with the Vietnam War are so popular that they have become staples of college curriculums (Johannessen, 1992). My own experience is similar. I have taught at least one course dealing with Vietnam War literature every year since 1988, and usually the course has been closed (or full) by the end of the first day of registration. Clearly, students want to know about the war, and, in part, it is their own interest in the subject that can provide an important first link toward enhancing their response to this literature, and perhaps provide a link to other literature we teach.

Unfortunately, our students come to use with very little real knowledge of the war, and what little they do know is full of distortions (Christie, 1989; McCloud, 1989; Johannessen, 1990,1992, & in press). Research indicates that most students are not learning about the war in their history classes and very few students have ever read a serious work of literature that deals with the war in an English class or on their own. What little they do know about the war does not go much beyond Hollywood's *Rambo* series, or the various adventure novels, such as the *Saigon Commando* or *Night Fighter* series, in which Vietnam is merely a backdrop (Johannessen, in press), or the romantic novels, such as those by Ellen Elliot, Della Field, and Evelyn Hawkins--all called *Vietnam Nurse*--that are nothing

more than Harlequin romances set in Vietnam (Puhr, 1988). The best example I have of students' lack of knowledge and distortions about the war took place in the fall of 1988. If you will recall, during the summer of that year, the Olympics were held in Seoul, South Korea. One of my students came up to me after class one day to ask me a question. "I think I understand all this stuff were are reading in the literature," she said, "but what I can't understand is if we lost this war against the Vietnamese, how could we send our athletes there last summer for the Olympics?" Obviously, this young lady had confused Vietnam with South Korea.

Ironically, most of our students know more about the Civil War than they do about the war that was the defining experience for their parents' generation and continues to shape society and their lives. So, what we have are students who are interested in learning about the war, but who come to us knowing very little and what little they do know is full of distortions. Does this mean that we have to teach students the history of the war before they will able to read the literature? No, not necessarily. What it does mean is that having our students study some of these works can help them understand the war, their parents, and how the legacies of the war continue to have an impact on society and their lives. Ultimately, studying these works may help students to deal more effectively with the world they will encounter outside of school and "empower [them] to take responsibility for issues that affect their lives and the future of our planet" (Wilcox, 1988, 40).

"Vietnam War Opinionnaire"

Hollywood is at least partly responsible for students' interest in the war. The *Rambo* films and television shows such as *China Beach* have had a great deal to do with sparking their interest. Unfortunately, too many youngsters seem to be caught up in what I call the China Beach Party images and Rambesque shoot'em-up myths of Hollywood's Vietnam. Since the war is rarely dealt with in most secondary school curricula, their myths and images have not been challenged. Therefore, this first activity I would like to show you and the stories that go along with it utlilize students' interest in and their ideas and opinions about the Vietnam War.

If you will turn to the next page of your handout (Appendix B, p. 39), I'd like to show you how this activity works in the classroom and how this type of activity engages students in the literature they are about to read, prepares them for problems they will encounter in their reading, and helps prepare students for writing. "The Vietnam War Opinionnaire" is designed to be used not just with the two stories that follow the opinionnaire in your handout but with any number of works dealing with the Vietnam War. The point is that this kind of activity is very versitile. Add a couple of statements and it can be used to introduce any number of short works dealing with the same theme or a longer work or a literature unit.

The two stories following the "Vietnam War Opinionnaire" (not included in this paper), "Centurion" by Tim O'Brien (from *If I Die in a Combat Zone* [Dell, 1987]) and "We Have Met the Enemy" by Robin Moore (from *Combat Pay* [Manor Books, 1977]) speak to the media-molded myths and images of youth concerning the Vietnam War. Both stories suggest the madness of a war in which decent men must confront the inescapable brutality of war. In O'Brien's story, students discover that brutality is the inescapable outcome when a raid on a village turns up an enemy weapon but

no visible enemy. In Moore's story, they see how acts of self-preservation can result in brutality. Both stories make clear that the realities of the Vietnam War are far different from Hollywood's romantized and glorified versions. They suggest to students the dangers of believing in these images and myths.

How Students See War

This opinionnaire utilizes students' ideas and opinions about the Vietnam War. It allows students varying degrees of agreement or disagreement with each statement. A number of statements on the opinionnaire are keyed to ideas and themes students will encounter in their reading.

Before students read the stories I have them fill out the opinionnaire on their own. Then, I compile the results on the board, but to keep this step simple, I merely ask for students who agreed and strongly agreed to raise their hands and then for students who disagreed or strongly disagreed to raise their hands for each statement. Then, beginning with the statements for which there is the most disagreement, I lead a class discussion that focuses on students' responses to each statement. I encourage students to explain the reasoning behind their responses and to debate differing opinions. Since the statements on the opinionnaire require students to take a stand, a lively discussion invariably ensues.

An interesting modification of the procedures I have described is to have students meet in small groups after completing the opinionnaire on their own and have them try to reach a consensus on their responses before the whole class discussion.

The disagreement over the statements that is created in the classroom is an important factor in interesting or engaging students in the literature. At the end of the discussion of the opinionnaire, the teacher might use the disagreement with a statement like, "I see that we have considerable disagreement over statements #3 and #9 (read statements). Let's read these two stories and find out which viewpoint is correct." Students are motivated to read because they want to find out if their view of Rambo is correct.

A second purpose of the opinionnaire and the follow-up discussion is to create interest in the characters and and themes in the stories students are about to read. Items #12 and #13 (read statements), for example, relate to one aspect of the problem faced by the narrator of "Centurion." The officers in his unit randomly pull three old men out of a hut, tie them up, gag them, and then tie them to saplings in the center of the unit's perimeter, using the logic that the enemy guerrillas will not attack that night because they have taken their fathers prisoner. The narrator feels compassion for the old men. He thinks they may be innocent and knows that in the morning they will be tortured for information about the enemy. Yet, he does almost nothing to help them. He seems to be unable to do anything significant about the brutality of the incident, accepting it as the price of survival in a crazy war.

Student responses to the items on the opinionnaire usually indicate that many of them believe that a person can do the right thing, not harm innocent civilians, and still survive in war. O'Brien suggests that in the Vietnam War, morality and compassion for innocent civilians may have to take a back seat when survival is at stake. Through the discussion, not just deciding if they agree or disagree with these statements on the opinionnaire,

students begin to question some of their initial responses and are motivated to find out how characters will deal with these issues in the stories.

One way that the activity helps students begin to understand what the authors of the stories want them to understand about the Vietnam War is related to the sterotyped views students have about war. Many students have an oversimplified good-guys-against-the-bad-guys image of the war. In the discussion of the opinionnaire, students are often surprised to discover that some of their peers do not find the Rambo image accurate or desirable. In addition, in discussing statement #10, "The Soldier above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war," some student inevitably wonders, "This is in quotes, who said it?" If no one in the class knows, I reveal that the statement was made by General Douglas MacArthur, one of America's greatest generals. Students are very surprised by this, and as we discuss why MacArthur might have made such a statement, students begin to wonder if war is as romantic as the images and myths of Hollywood's version of the Vietnam War. These statements, and others on the opinionnaire, help students come to the literature with a framework or context that will better enable them to understand the stories they are about to read. They don't need a history of the Vietnam War.

One other interesting aspect of how the opinionnaire works, how it gets students to think and begin to question some of their initial responses, involves the way some of the statements are set up. In marking their answers, students, without realizing it, often contradict themselves. For example, it is not uncommon for a student to agree with statements #13 and #7 (read statements). As the discussion develops, however, students often realize (on their own or as a result of their peers pointing it out) that they

have a contradiction in thought. It is not uncommon for one students to tell another, "How can you say it is never right to kill another person when you just got through saying that when your own survival is at stake, you can't worry about harming or killing innocent civilians." These statements encourage disagreement or discussion and get students thinking about the issues and themes in the stories.

After discussing most or all of the statements on the opinionnaire, have students read the two stories. Then divide the class into small, mixed groups and, using the "Discussion Questions for 'Centurion' and 'We Have Met the Enemy'," the next page of your handout (Appendix B, p. 40), ask them to determine from evidence in the stories how the narrator and Bates would have reacted had they been in the situation Hucks and Leland were confronted with in "We Have Met the Enemy" and how Hucks and Leland would have reacted had they been in the situation narrator and Bates faced in "Centurion."

Dealing with Irony

Once students have come up with their conclusions, evidence, and explanations, I have the class reassemble to discuss their findings. As the groups begin reporting their answers, students are surprised to discover that it would not have made any difference. Most agree that Moore's characters, like O'Brien's, would have done little to help the old men, and that O'Brien's characters probably would have killed the shadowy figure that ran into a cave behind their position and turned out to be a young Vietname girl. Once students understand that these different characters probably would have

reacted the same in either situation, they are prepared to deal with the irony and what the authors are telling us about the Vietnam War.

As we discuss their responses, students begin to formulate important conclusions about the stories. They realize, for example, that O'Brien is not criticizing the narrator of his story for doing very little to help the old men who are tortured. They see the irony of his situation--had the patrol not taken the three old men prisoner, they probably would have been attacked by the enemy. Students recognize the lack of choices in such a situation; the patrol takes the old men prisoner and tortures them because, as Bates tells the narrator, "This is war, my friend. You don't find a weapon and just walk away." Students perceive that O'Brien is really telling us that, even for those with a strong sense of right and wrong, cruely and brutality are inevitable outcomes of war. In addition, they realize that O'Brien echoes the comment Philip Caputo makes in one of the major works on the war, *A Rumor of War,* when he leaves Vietnam: "We had done nothing more than endure," he writes. "We had survived, and that was our only victory."

Following this discussion, I often ask students to refer back to the opinionnaire and to circle the responses to the statements as they think O'Brien and Moore would circle them and to compare their responses in light of their observations about the stories. Then I hold a whole class discussion. Usually, for example, there is nearly unanimous agreement that O'Brien and Moore would find the Rambo image undesirable. Even though there is considerable agreement as to how O'Brien and Moore would respond to many of the statements, there is usually some disagreement about a few of them. For example, some students argue that certainly O'Brien and perhaps Moore as well would strongly disagree with statement #3, "For soldiers who served in Vietnam, the difference between death and survival often meant not

worrying about potential harm to innocent civilians or doing the right or moral thing." They note, however, that even though the narrator in O'Brien's story does what he has to do to survive, he still "worries" about doing the right or moral thing and tries to do something. This shows, they argue, that O'Brien wants us to understand that soldiers can't simply abandon morality in war. They have to take it into account. Pretty insightful.

Very often student opinions have undergone a transformation as a result of their study of the stories. One young man made this comment: "In this one movie Vietnam looked like it would be fun and exciting, but in these stories it's awfull" Students begin to see the impact that the literature has had on them.

Follow-up Writing

If you will look at the next page of your handout, "Vietnam War Writing Assignments (Appendix B, p. 41)," I'll describe some of the assignments I have used with this pre-reading/writing activity and these short stories and how it encourages effective writing.

Keep in mind what has taken place so far. The discussion of the statements on the opinionnaire prior to reading that establishes the context, or helps to prepare students for interpreting the stories, and engages them in the characters and themes. Then after reading the stories, students discussed how the characters in the stories would have reacted in the situations presented in the other stories. Then students discussed what the authors probably would have said about the statements on the opinionnaire. Finally, they discussed how their own responses have or have not changed as a result of having studied the two stories.

The disagreement over what the authors probably would have said about the statements provides a natural follow-up writing situation, assignment #1. (Read Assignment.) Students are motivated in this writing situation because it is real. They are writing to a real audience--their peers! It follows directly out of what they have done in the class discussions, so they have rehersed arguments, presented evidence and reasoning to support their interpretations, and heard refutations of their viewpoints. They are ready to write. And they have a reason to write--to convince their peers to change their conclusions. This is literary analysis as it should be.

Another possible follow-up writing activity is to have students read on their own another story that involves the Vietnam War and that uses irony to convey its meaning. This is assignment #2 and the story that follows the assignments, Charles Coe's "Young Man in Vietnam" (story is not included in this paper), is one that I have used for this assignment a number of times. I have students read the story on their own and then write an interpretation of it. Again, I have had good success with this assignment. I believe it is because the pre-reading activity and the follow-up discussions model for students how to interpret this literature and how to turn their interpretations into written analytical essays. They gain confidence from their participation in the sequence of discussion activities I went over.

Assignment #3 follows directly from the class discussion of how students' opinions have or have not changed as a result of reading the story. (Read assignment.) This assignment is both a personal response and involves some literary analysis. Students have success with this assignment because they have thought about and discussed their opinions before reading and after reading the story, and they are able to explain how their opinions have changed as a result of reading the story. Without the

opinionnaire activity before reading the story that requires them to articulate and defend their opinions, their written responses are not very good.

Assignment #4 is a creative assignment. (Read assignment.) Students usually have little difficulty with this assignment because in essence they have discussed this thoroughly in the follow-up discussion of the stories. In fact, in that discussion students often discuss various scenarios regarding how the characters probably would have acted. In short, they usually have plenty of ideas for writing. In addition, many often are anxious to show how they believe the characters would have acted based on their interpretations of the story. Last spring one of my student teachers had her eleventh grade classes do this assignment, and in one student's new scene in "We Have Met the Enemy," Bates and the narrator kill the shadowy figure they see run into the cave behind their position. When they realize they have killed a young Vietnamese girl, the narrator begins agonizing over what he has done. Bates turns to him and echoing what he said in "Centurion," says, "This is war, my friend. You don't let a shadowy figure move behind your position when you're in a fire fight and just walk away."

Assignment #5 is a personal response to the story. (Read assignment.) It follows directly from the discussions prior to and after reading and discussing the story. In these discussions student are rehersing what they are going to be asked to do in writing.

I have used this opinionnaire to introduce a number of works dealing with the Vietnam War: Besides the short stories I have shown you here today and Philip Caputo's, *A Rumor of War,* that I mentioned earlier, I have used it with James Webb's, *Fields of Fire,* Walter Dean Myer's, *Fallen Angels,* Ron Kovic's, *Born on the Fourth of July,* Mark Baker's oral history *Nam,*

Michael Herr's, *Dispatches*, Bobby Ann Mason's, *In Country*, and Tim O'Brien's, *Going after Cacciato*.

Teaching Nonfiction Works of the Vietnam War

Another way that the literature of the Vietnam War appeals to young people is through the voice of the narrator and the nature of the experience that is the focus of many of these works. This is particularly true in many of the personal narratives, collected letters, and oral histories. In fact, one of the real strengths of this type of literature is that it is accessible to nearly all students. The speakers of these works establish a confidential, intimate relationship with the reader, in a voice that seems to be speaking directly to them. In addition, the voice of these works is one which contains the persuasive power of truth telling that only an eyewitness can claim (Lawson, 1988). I liken this to bringing "Eye-Witness Video" type television programs into the classroom.

More important, the heart of these works is the adolescent experience. Unlike previous wars, the Vietnam War was America's first war fought by teenagers. The average age of combatants in Vietnam was 19 years as compared with 26 years for the soldier in World War II. The result is that the speakers in many of these narratives are teenagers who are much like our students. In addition, because of their youth, many of these young people were not mentally prepared for the carnage and terror that marked the Vietnam experience. As a result, in writing about their experiences, these young people speak of the idealism, loneliness, homesickness, fear, terror, feelings of isolation and abandonment, and finally of betrayal in ways that speak directly to our students.

My own students speak of their fascination with these works and how much the speakers seem just like them. In fact, oral historian Mark Baker, author of *Nam*, probably best describes the typical student reaction to these works when he recounts his own reaction to interviewing veterans for his oral history:

> There was an aura about the people who were over there. These guys were kids, but they weren't kids. There was something in their eyes that made them absolutely different. I was fascinated, mesmerized by these guys. I couldn't take my eyes of them. There was something very old about them, but I still felt like a kid. (1981, 62)

Many of the nonfiction works of the war follow the contours of the narrative of education or *Bildungsroman*, at the heart of which is the year-long tour of duty (Lawson, 1988; Johannessen, 1992). This overall structure is enhanced by each veteran's desire to tell his story and the need to understand what, exactly happened to him or her, or to explain, in absolute terms, the effect of having, as Philip Caputo says in his memoir, *A Rumor of War*, "a lifetime of experience compressed into a year and a half" (1977, 4).

The narrative of education, or the process of becoming what one literary scholar describes as an "old kid" (Lawson, 1988) occurs in five phases which provide the infrasture for these narratives. These phases are (and you will find one version of this in your handout): (1) the mystique of pre-induction, (2) the initiation into boot camp, (3) the dislocation of arrival in Vietnam, (4) the confrontation with mortality in the first firefight, and (5)

the phenomenon of coming home, as Baker describes it, "nineteen-year-old bodies with thirty-five-year-old minds" (Baker, 1981, 130).

This narrative structure also suggests a very effective way to approach teaching this literature. It suggests logical ways to make reading assignments, to organize class discussions and other activities, and to explore important thematic and structural elements with students. I have used this structure when my students study the personal narratives and oral histories of veterans. If you'll turn to the next two pages of your handout (Appendix B, p. 42), I'll show one way you might set up instruction based on the narrative of education to teach Mark Baker's oral History *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981), and this same approach works with many other nonfiction narratives of the war.

I begin the work by assigning students to read the "introduction" and the first section of the work titled, "Initiation: Ask Not." After students have read these sections, I lead a class discussion using the "Discussion Questions" in your handout. You might also use these questions as a study guide or you might want to have students answer them in small groups before leading a whole class discussion of their responses. What is important about the questions is that they get at the specifics of the of the first two stages of the overall structure of the narrative of education I just described to you, the mystique of pre-induction and the initiation into boot camp. For example, question #5 focuses on the mystique of pre-induction. Some of the speakers talk about President John F. Kennedy's famous line: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can for your country" as the call that inspired them to go into the military.

After I take students through the first part of the work, I assign them to read the rest of it. Then, I give them the "Small Group Assigment" you see

in your handout (Appendix B, p. 43). (Read directions.) As the directions indicate, I assign students to small groups to report to the class on a particular section of the book. The groups have a set of generic questions that are, in part, designed to help students understand the themes and structure in their assigned section.

I give students class time to work on their oral presentation and then they give their presentations in the order they are listed on the sheet. As the groups take the class through their assigned sections, students begin to formulate conclusions about conclusions about the war and the nature of the Vietnam experience. For example, one issue that students always want to discuss is the cumulative effect of the war on the young people who went to Vietnam. They see how Vietnam turned idealistic youths motivated perhaps by Kennedy's famous call lose their innocence and return home as "old kids."

Other questions on the assignment sheet have a very different purpose. For example, these works often have such an emotional impact on students that it is important to examine how they achieve their emotional power. Question #9, then, is designed to help students think about their initial responses. In addition, there are also questions that ask students to consider the author's arrangement of materials, and how the work may or may not contribute to the historical record.

The Writing Connection

The next page of your handout (Appendix B, p. 44) contains the follow up writing assignments I have used with this work. Once again, I have provided you with a variety of kinds of writing assignments that you might want to use.

The first assignment is an analytical assignment in which students must write about the stages of the Vietnam experience or narrative of education. (Read assignment.) I think you can see how this assignment follows directly from the work students have done in their small groups and class discussions of their findings. Because oral histories tend to be more direct than much imaginative literature, many students do quite well with this type of analytical assignment. Often, their success with this assignment translates into more effective analytical essays about more complex literature we study later on.

The focus of the second assignment is directly related to some of the questions from their small group assignment sheet and is important for some other reasons as well. For example, one of the questions that sometimes comes up in class, and sometimes comes from parents is, "Why are you reading oral history in English class?" (Read assignment.) As you can see, this analytical assignment asks students to consider the work as a work of literature and/or history. It allows students considerable freedom to answer the question. I have had some interesting, insightful, and unusual papers from students.

The third assignment is also analytical and follows directly from students' work in their small groups. (Read assignment.) While many students write about the aspect of the Vietnam experience that they worked on in their small groups, some end up writing about an aspect of the Vietnam experience that they were particularly interested in or were inspired to examine because of what other small groups have presented.

The fourth assignment asks students to do some original research, and, as you will see, it to follows directly from the work students have previously done on *Nam.* (Read assignment.) With this assignment, students must

utilize the knowledge they have gained in reading the work and apply it to the real world. This kind of assignment has tremendous appeal for students. Many teachers who have had their students do oral history projects like the assignment described here report that the results are almost always beyond what they had expected (Carter, 1989 & 1991, Oldham, 1986).

Finally, the fifth assignment involves personal response. (Read assignment.) In this instance, students are asked to write about a traumatic experience that, like the experiences described by veterans, made them old before their time. In doing this assignment, students often write about having to deal with the loss of a loved one, or, in many cases, write about having to deal with a moral issue involving right and wrong.

An important point to keep in mind about the writing assignments I have shown you. All of them have their roots in the activities, the instruction, that preceeds them. These are not assignments for the sake of an assignment. They are designed to enable students to use and extend the knowledge they have gained in studying the work. They are designed to connect reading and writing.

Besides Baker's work there are a number of other oral histories and personal narratives, you might want to try using the approach I have described. Some of the works will require some modifications, but most can be taught using the overall approach I have described. Listed in the "Annotated Bibliography," (Appendix A, pp. 32-35) are some of the nonfiction works that work well with this approach: Philip Caputo's, *A Rumor of War,* Ron Kovic's, *Born on the Fourth of July,* Michael Herr's, *Dispatches,* Bernard Edelman's, *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam,* Bob Greene's, *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam,* Tim O'Brien's, *If I Die in a Combat Zone,* Kathryn Marshall's, *In the Combat Zone:*

An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, and Lynda Van Devanter's, *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam.*

The Adolescent Experience in Combat Novels of the Vietnam War

The combat narrative is perhaps the best known type of war literature. A number of authors have written novels that attempt to portray the experience of fighting in Vietnam. Like some of the texts we already teach (*The Red Badge of Courage, A Farewell to Arms, All Quiet on the Western Front,* and *Catch-22* among them), these works demand that students think about what it really meant to live and fight in this war.

As with the nonfiction narratives I just discussed, these works have tremendous appeal to young people. One reason is that this literature speaks to students in compelling ways through the voice of the narrator and the nature of the experience that is the focus of much of this literature. As with the nonfiction narratives, these novels follow the contours of the narrative of education. However, the nature of this innocence through experience to consideration and understanding experience is the adolescent experience--that of a naive youth who is transformed by his or her experiences. And, the experience is told through the eyes of someone not much older than most high school students. In other words, in many ways this literature seems to students to be written by someone much like themselves, and it seems to be about some of the same struggles they face.

Let me give you just one example: The narrator and main character of Walter Dean Myers' novel *Fallen Angels* (1988) is seventeen-year-old Richard Perry. Like our our own students, one of his struggles is to determine what it means to be a friend, to care deeply for another human

being. Our own students face this same question. As they struggle to learn what friendship really means, many of them seem to change "best friends" three or four times a class period. As Richie Perry struggles with this issue, he and another soldier, Peewee, find themselves cut off from their platoon and surrounded by Vietcong. It is night. They are both terrified, and as they decide what they will do and prepare for an expected attack by the enemy, Peewee reaches out and puts his hand on Richie's wrist. Richie asks Peewee what is wrong.

> "Nothing," he whispered back.
>
> He kept his hand on my wrist. I moved my hand and took his. We held hands in the darkness. (1988, 285)

This moving scene, told from the viewpoint of seventeen-year-old Richie, represents Richie's final step in coming to understand what it means to be someone's friend. They are caught in the absolute worst of circumstances, and in this situation they reach out to help and comfort one another. In terms of the traditional combat narrative, this is certainly the theme of brotherhood in war, but for our teenage students this is an important lesson in friendship--a lesson taught to them not by a twenty-six year old adult soldier landing on the beach at Normandy in World War II--twenty-six by the way is the average age of soldiers who fought in world War II--but rather, this lesson is taught by another teenager who is fighting in a confusing jungle war, which seems to be much like their own confusing world, and this teenage soldier is struggling with some of the very issues they are experiencing.

Organizing Instruction to Teach Combat Novels of the Vietnam War

If you will turn to the next page of your handout (Appendix B, p. 45), I'll show you one way you might approach this literature. What you see here is an expanded version of the five stages of the narrative of education I described earlier, along with key questions for each stage. One reason that it is expanded is because there are differences between novels and personal narratives. One very important difference is that the experience in novels is often much richer than that contained in many of the personal narratives.

In fact, I would argue that there is really a sixth or in some cases a seventh stage. If you will look at #5, I'll try to show you what I am talking about. Much like many combat novels of World War I, such as Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front,* the main character experiences a loss of innocence and goes through a period of consideration and reaches some kind of understanding about the experience.

Also, the sheet contains some overall questions for discussing major themes and issues, and, depending on the particular work, I have included questions that focus on structure and style and literary techniques. I think you can see that this provides the basis for an overall plan for teaching combat novels of the war.

Some of the novels that might be taught using this approach (and are listed in the "Annotated Bibliography") include Kent Anderson's *Sympathy for the Devil,* Jack Fuller's *Fragments,* Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels,* James Webb's *Fields of Fire,* Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters,* Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato,* John M. Del Vecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley,* and Ronald J. Glasser's *365 Days.*

Follow-up Writing

I have provided four writing assignments that work with many of the works I have just mentioned (Appendix B, p. 46). As with the previous follow up assignments I have shown you, most follow directly from the instructional approach I have described.

The first assignment is analytical and asks students to interpret what the author wants readers to understand about the Vietnam War. The assignment follows directly from key questions on the previous page of your handout involving the central meaning of the work.

The second assignment focuses on character analysis and asks students to explain how the protagonist changes as a result of his or her experiences in the war. If you are interested, you might want to take a look at my book, *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War* (1992) contains a whole series of activities designed to prepare students for this assignment.

The third assignment combines some analysis with personal response. It asks students to think about what they have learned about the war as a result of reading a particular novel.

The last assignment is also personal response. It asks students to think about some of the themes and issues in the novel that are still with us today and to consider what can be done to heal the wounds of the war.

Obviously, these assignments are only meant as suggestions of some different ways to get students to think and respond to these works of literature. The most important point about what I have tried to show you here is that combining appropriate and engaging instruction, with literature that is of interest to students, results in high levels of student involvement,

and thoughtful and insightful or enhanced student responses. One teacher I know who regularly teaches the literature of the Vietnam War reports that her students' responses to this literature is "nothing short of electric" (Carter, 1991).

"The Literature of the Vietnam War: An Annotated Bibliography"

The next few pages of your handout (Appendix A, pp. 32-35) are an annotated bibliography of some of the literature of the Vietnam War. It is divided into two parts. The first part contains adolescent literature that deals with the Vietnam War. Each entry contains full bibliographic information, a brief summary of the plot and sometimes key themes, any other information that may be important, and a recommended teaching level for the work. The second part of the bibliography lists some of the important and most teachable works to come out of the war. Most of these works are probably best for high school and college students.

My hope is that you will think about what I have said about the appeal of this literature to young people and the value of teaching it. Then, take some time to look through the bibliography and see if there isn't one or two works listed there that you think your students might be interested in reading. Then, try them out with your own students.

Conclusion

I have argued that teaching the literature of Vietnam War offers a unique opportunity to encourage response to literature. I have only been able to show you a few short examples of students' responses to some of the

literature, discuss two major types of literature that have come out of the war, show you a very activities to use with this literature, suggest a couple of approaches to teaching this literature that foster response, provide some model writing assignments that encourage different kinds of responses, and discuss a few of the ways that this literature speaks directly to students. However, after years of teaching the literature of the Vietnam War, it is my students who continually remind me of a simple truth about this literature, and indeed all literature, if it is worth studying--it is the characters, the human beings, that hold their interest, fascinate them, and evoke their empathy, and it is through the characters that they come to understand some truths about the Vietnam War. The reason for this is perhaps best stated by Mark Baker, who writes,

> War poses all the hard philosophical questions about life and death and morality and demands immediate answers. The abstractions of scholarly debate become the very concrete matters of survival. In one short year, Vietnam took the measure of a man and of the culture that put him there. War strips away the thin veneer applied slap-dash by the institutions of society and shows Man for exactly what he is. We must listen closely to the men and women who became both the victims and the perpetrators of the war, if we want to learn something real about this particular conflict, something real about the human spirit, something real about ourselves. (1981, xvi)

In other words, this literature speaks to them because the characters speak directly to them about the important issues that concern us all. This literature fosters response because in it students find what seems to elude them so often with much of the literature we ask them to read: they find answers to their questions--their questions about the past, about their parents, and about how to live their lives--and, as a result, they are empowered to face the issues that affect their lives and their future.

Finally, why should you teach Vietnam War literature? First, as I have found, teaching the literature of the Vietnam War can enliven literature study in our classrooms. Also, as I have tried to demonstrate, through this literature we can encourage a variety of student responses. In addition, we can show our students the value of literature, all literature; and, finally, we can help them make the kinds of connections to literature, to the past, that will enrich their lives long after they leave our classrooms--and, as I indicated at the very beginning of this presentation--isn't that what we ultimately want for our students?

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APPENDIX A

SELECTED AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE LITERATURE OF VIETNAM WAR

The Literature of the Vietnam War: An Annotated Bibliography

Part I: Adolescent Literature and the Vietnam War:

A Blue-Eyed Daisy. Cynthia Rylant. Dell, 1987, 181 pp., $2.95. ISBN 0-440-40927-6.
Eleven-year-old Ellie Farley's uncle Joe goes off to war. She is confused about wars wars and men killing one another and even more confused by her family's and uncle's silence upon his return. Middle school/junior high.

A Boat to Nowhere. Maureen Crane Wartski. NAL-Dutton, 1981, 160 pp., $2.95. ISBN 0-553-25560-6.
Villagers protest Thay Van Chi's protection of a wandering orphan. They appear to be right when the boy seems to side with the Vietcong when they arrive. What the villagers do not realize is that the boy is acting so that he will have an opportunity to save them. The villagers become boat people and must endure terrible hardships and dangers. Junior high up.

Caribou. Meg Wolitzer. Bantam, 1986, 176 pp., $2.50. ISBN 0-553-25560-6.
Becca Silverman, a twelve-year-old, is troubled by the Vietnam War. In fact, she is troubled by the idea of war in general. Her brother escapes to Canada to avoid the draft. She decides to paint a vivid antiwar picture as her entry in the school's art contest, whose theme is patriotism. Middle school/junior high.

Charlie Pippin. Candy Dawson Boyd. Puffin Books, 1987, 192 pp., $3.95. ISBN 0-14-032587-5.
The father of eleven-year-old Charlie returns home from Vietnam a bitter, rigid man. Charlie tries to understand her father by studying about the Vietnam War. She discovers that her father is a decorated war hero. The novel examines how too many blacks had to fight the war. Middle school/junior high.

Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam. Ed. Bernard Edelman. Pocket, 1986, 316 pp., $6.95. ISBN 0-671-61750-8.
This is a collection of letters home from those serving and working in Vietnam during the war in all areas from soldiers to donut dollies. The last chapter, "Last Letters," is powerful and heartbreaking. A 1989 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers. Senior high up.

December Stillness. Mary Downing Hahn. Avon,1990,192 pp., $2.95. ISBN 0-380-70764-0.
This 1990 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers focuses on thirteen-year-old Kelly McAlister. Kelly gains an enriched view of life beyond the routine of school when she attempts to befriend Mr. Weems, a disturbed, homeless Vietnam veteran. In the process of helping him, Kelly grows emotionally and acquires social awareness and responsibility. Middle school up.

Fallen Angels. Walter Dean Myers. Scholastic, 1988, 309 pp., $3.50. ISBN 0-590-40943-3.
Selected as a 1990 *EJ* reviewers' choice (five reviewers) and a 1990 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers, this novel tells the story of Richie Perry, 17, who enlists to fight in Vietnam as a way out of a dead-end life in Harlem. He experiences all of the horrors of war as well as the racial conflict that existed among American troops. Richie questions his religious faith and his moral values. Junior high up.

Hello, My Name Is Scrambled Eggs. Jamie Gilson. Minstrel Books, 1988, 183 pp., $3.95. ISBN 0-671-74104-7.

Tuan Nguyen is a Vietnamese refugee who arrives in America to live with the Trumble family in a small town in Illinois. Their son, Harvey, is a seventh grader grader who tries to mold Tuan into an "American kid." Middle school/junior high.

Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam. Bob Greene. Ballantine, 1990, 256 pp., $4.95. ISBN 0-345-36408-2
This is an interesting collection of letters by Vietnam veterans who wrote to author and syndicated columnist Bob Greene after he had asked his readers whether anyone had spat upon them when they came home from the war. It reports on the collision between the war in Asia and the war the vets faced at home. Senior high up.

If I Die in a Combat Zone. Tim O'Brien. Dell, 1987, 205 pp., $4.50. ISBN 0-440-34311-9.
Besides being named ALA Best Book for Young Adults in 1973, this is considered by some as one of the most important works to come out of the war. It is the story of one soldier's journey from safe, middle-class America to the center of the horror of the Vietnam War. O'Brien emphasizes the fear and the moral dilemmas. Senior high up.

In Country. Bobbie Ann Mason. Harper-Collins,1989, 368 pp., $5.95. ISBN 0-06-080959-0.
Besides being chosen as a 1990 *EJ* reviewers' choice (three reviewers), this effective novel tells the story of Samantha Hughes, a recent high school graduate who wants answers about the Vietnam War. Her father was killed in the war. Her mother can't really tell her anything about her father since they were married only a month before his death. Her uncle, Emmett, with whom she lives, could be suffering ill effects from exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. She is attracted to another Vietnam vet who is emotionally scarred by the war. Senior high up.

In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975. Kathryn Marshall. Viking, 1988, 280 pp., $7.95. ISBN 0-14-010829-7.
The author interviewed twenty women who tell about their experiences in the war. They relate their many motives for going to Vietnam, their experiences, and the impact the war had on their lives. Marshall interviewed army nurses, Red Cross workers, and civilians. Senior high up.

Park's Quest. Katherine Paterson. Puffin Books,1989, 180 pp., $3.95. ISBN 0-14-034262-1.
The author describes the effects of the war on the children of those who served. The main character, Park, comes to his grandfather's farm in Virginia to learn more about his father, who died in Vietnam, and his father's family. He meets a Vietnamese-American girl named Thanh, who may be his half-sister. Junior high up.

Pocket Change. Kathryn Jensen. Scholastic, 1990, 169 pp., $2.95. ISBN 0-590-43419-5.
This 1991 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers focuses on some of the effects of the war on the families and children of those who served in Vietnam. Josie's life falls apart when her father's increasingly erratic and violent behavior threatens their family. Determined to help him, she pieces together clues from his past and becomes convinced that his experiences in the Vietnam War are continuing to haunt him. Junior high up.

Travelers. Larry Bograd. Lippincott, 1986, 192 pp., $11.90. ISBN 0-397-32128-7.
A boy is haunted by the image of the father he never knew, who died in Vietnam. He tries to find out more about him. He questions the adults around him, but they avoid his questions. As the boy uncovers the truth, he discovers the unhealed wounds that the war has left all around him. Junior high up.

The Voyage of Lucky Dragon. Jack Bennett. Prentice-Hall, 1985, 156 pp., $3.95. ISBN 0-13944158-1

After the fall of Saigon, a Vietnamese family flees the Communist reeducation camps in a fishing boat bound for Australia. This novel examines the plight of the boat people. Senior high.

What Should We Tell Our Children about Vietnam? Bill McCloud. Berkley, 1989, 155 pp., $4.50. ISBN 0-425-13361-3.

The author, a Vietnam veteran and junior high school social studies teacher, wondered what to tell his students about Vietnam. He wrote to the people who directed, fought, protested, and reported the war. These 128 letters form a remarkable cross-section of public opinion from statesmen, veterans, protestors, writers, and others. Some of the contributing writers and filmmakers include Allen Ginsberg, Larry Heinemann, John Hersey, Ken Kesey, Tim O'Brien, Oliver Stone, Kurt Vonnegut, and many others. Middle school up.

Part II: Some Important and Teachable Literature of the Vietnam War:

Born on the Fourth of July. Ron Kovic. Pocket, 1976, 224 pp., $4.50. ISBN 0-671-52792-4.

An important book in Vietnam War literature. Kovic describes his idealistic enlistment in the Marines, his service in Vietnam, his painful return home in a wheelchair, and his treatment at the hands of the Veterans Administration. He also tells of his involvement in the antiwar movement, attending the Republican Convention, and disrupting Nixon's acceptance speech.

Close Quarters. Larry Heinemann. Penguin, 1974, 336 pp., $8.95. ISBN 0-140-08678-5.

This classic novel of the war follows the coming of age of Philip Dosier and his fellow soldiers in Vietnam, where they learn that war is nothing like a John Wayne movie. Dosier returns home stunned by his experiences and deadened to emotions.

Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam. Dir. Bill Couturie. Couturie Co. and Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theater Company, 1988. (84 minutes, color.) HBO Home Video.

A powerful documentary featuring pictures and film of the war with voice-overs by dozens of Hollywood stars reading the words of American GIs. The film follows a chronology that roughly corresponds to a soldier's year in Vietnam. The readings are from the collection of letters with the same title.

Fields of Fire. James Webb. Bantam, 1978, 415 pp., $3.95. ISBN 0-553-25679-3.

In this major novel of the Vietnam War, a Marine unit fights the Vietcong, endures unbelievable living conditions, confronts the dangers of the "bush," and faces death and injury. Webb explores the reasons each man became a Marine, as the reader follows him through combat. The novel also examines the difficulties veterans face when they return home.

Fragments. Jack Fuller. Dell, 1984, 287 pp., $4.50. ISBN 0-440-12687-8.

This is one of the major Vietnam novels. Fuller presents a vivid account of the wartime experiences and friendship between two young men. The two soldiers symbolize different points of view about how to survive. In the course of the story, both are wounded, and one of the men kills a Vietnamese family.

Going after Cacciato. Tim O'Brien. Dell, 1978, 395 pp., $4.50. ISBN 0-440-12966-4.

This 1979 National Book Award winner is an account of a soldier's flight from battle that alternates between fantasy and reality. Paul Berlin, shocked by the horror and

hopelessness of the war, walks away from his unit in the jungle, hoping to make his way to Paris. He is pursued by a group of soldiers.

Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam. Lynda Van Devanter. Warner, 1983, 382 pp., $4.95. ISBN 0-446-30962-1.
The author tells of her experiences during her tour of duty; her change from an idealist who once viewed the war as a chance to save a country from communist control; the problems she had when she returned home, including being treated as "a murderer rather than a healer"; and her experiences with posttraumatic stress disorder. This is a powerful narrative.

Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There. Mark Baker. Berkley, 1981, 301 pp., $4.50. ISBN 0-425-07168-5.
One of the classics of Vietnam War literature. The author interviewed both men and women, officers, enlisted men of all kinds, prowar and antiwar veternas. He asked them, "What was Vietnam really like?" The result is a powerful, honest, and touchingly written book. The introduction is effective, and the interviews are organized around themes, which permits easy analysis and allows for useful comparison with other war literature.

The Quiet American. Graham Greene. Viking, 1955, 249 pp., $8.95.
An influential and prophetic novel of Vietnam War literature, this work describes American involvement in Vietnam before it actually happened. This is the story of a jaded British war correspondent in Saigon whose uninvolved life is upset by a young American government agent who falls in love with the correspondent's Vietnamese mistress. The American is full of good intentions, but his naivete leads to trouble.

A Rumor of War. Philip Caputo. Ballantine, 1977, 328 pp., $4.95. ISBN 0-345-29070-4.
One of the major works of the war. Caputo was a young Marine infantry officer for sixteen months in Vietnam, beginning in 1965. He presents a grim, honest picture of the war. He recounts that the soldier's enemies were boredom and climate as much as the Viet Cong. Caputo provides an effective feeling for what fighting in Vietnam was really like.

The Thirteenth Valley. John M. Del Vecchio. Bantam, 1982, 666 pp., $6.95. ISBN 0-553-23560-5.
This is one of the best of the Vietnam War Novels; it tells the story of three men involved in a major combat mission in the Khe Ta Laou Valley in 1970. The book contains realistic portrayals of the men and their fears before and in battle. The author also describes the companionship the men find in each other, and their actions in the final jungle battle.

365 Days. Ronald J. Glasser, M. D. Bantam, 1971, 245 pp., $4.50. ISBN 0-553-07372-1.
An important book in Vietnam War literature. It is well-written and contains elements of memoir, oral history, and fiction. Glasser was an Army doctor who relates his experiences in Zama Hospital in Japan where he treated the wounded who were sent there from Vietnam.

Sympathy for the Devil. Kent Anderson. Warner,1987,350 pp.,$5.50. ISBN 0-446-35222-5.
This is an effective novel in which the main character, Hanson, comes to Vietnam as a naive, liberal, college-educated young man. After a series of atrocities and deaths, the horror of battle, and the despair of the war, Hanson becomes a hardened soldier.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT RESPONSES AND TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Excerpts from Student Responses to Vietnam War Literature

Mark Baker's oral history *Nam*:

After reading about what these boys had to live through, I learned something that I did not learn in history class. I learned what the Vietnam War was like from the eyes of the soldier's there--not as it was for the politicians safe in Washington, D. C.

The film *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*:

Student #1

I recommend the movie to all people who have misconceptions of what the war was like and about the men and women who fought it. I assure them, they will leave the film with a tear in their eye and a desire to find a Vietnam veteran and hug him or her!

Student #2

One startling factor of the film was in finding out that the people in America knew little or nothing about what the war was really like. In hearing that a mother sent her son "wing tips" [shoes] while he was in 'Nam, I wanted to slap her and tell her to wake up! This woman had to be really stupid or totally denying the truth to think her son could use wing tips in Vietnam.

Student #3

Another letter that really affected me was the one regarding the killings of four [students] at Kent State. The United States was in an uproar over this, but they did not seem to care about the thousands of soldiers getting killed in Vietnam. This letter was filled with all the pent up anger and frustration of the soldiers in Vietnam. These soldiers are risking their lives for their country but nobody at home seemed to care. To them (people at home) the occurrences in Vietnam did not affect them. It was happening in another country thousands of miles from home. The letter also contained a note of desperation. A desperate longing for the war to end, for the United States to become aware of what the soldiers were going through day after day as well as a longing to go home.

This movie taught me many things about the Vietnam War. It gave me an insight to the feelings of the soldiers as well as their families. This was a war I never learned about in school, yet this movie taught me more than any book could have. it gave personal insights of those who were there first hand, such as their uncertainties, fear and hatred of a war. It is something I will never forget.

Student #4

It [this film] brings the viewer into personal contact with the soldiers. You know them as people, not as indespensible Rambos as we are all to often led to believe. You understand that they have feelings, fears and desires and that they were scared as hell. They just wanted to come home. The movie stays with you as you realize that too many came home rolled up in the American flag--the reason they were there to begin with.

Student #3

Something that struck me was who the soldiers saw as the enemy. The answer was practically everyone and everything. These men "had to kill to survive." The enemy already had the advantage of fighting on their turf and the one thing we could not give them was opportunity. Before I really learned about the Vietnam War I used to wonder how our men could be so cruel as to kill children and families. The fact that the enemy used them to get to us made my skin crawl. No wonder "it's so very easy to kill in a war."

Student #6

The letter home that really struck me was the one by Raymond Griffiths. He writes to his friend how worried he is that he will lose his girlfriend. This reminded me of my boyfriend and I thought how romantic it would be if he went away to war and remembered me in the middle of all the fighting. But, as I was imagining this, Ray's picture appeared on the screen, and under it flashed the words, "Raymond Griffiths was killed a few weeks later on the Fourth of July. He was 19 years old, the average age of a combat soldier in Vietnam." As I read those lines a feeling of guilt came over me. How could I ever imagine (wish) or consider such a thing--wanting my boyfriend to go to war just so I could receive a romantic letter from him? I felt guilty as I imagined my boyfriend in war risking his life because I wanted a little romance.

Student #7

After viewing the film, the questions that went through my head were "Why do we go to war and is it worth it?" One soldier was asked, "Do you think that it is worth it?" And his reply was, "They say we are fighting for something but I don't know." After seeing how the soldiers suffered from day-to-day, wondering when they will go home or even if they will still be alive the next day, doesn't put a doubt in my mind and I don't think that it is worth it.

James Webb's novel *Fields of Fire*:

Fields of Fire was the most interesting, eye-opening novel I have ever read. it helped me understand what actually happened in Vietnam and helped me disregard my misconceptions I had had previously.

Vietnam War Opinionnaire

Directions: Read each of the following statements. Write A if you agree with the statement or D if you disagree with it.

Agree or
Disagree

_____ 1. "My country right or wrong" is not just a slogan--it is every citizen's patriotic duty.

_____ 2. Rambo is a good image for Americans to have of the Vietnam veteran: he represents all that America stands for and the American soldier in war.

_____ 3. "The only heroes in war are the dead ones."

_____ 4. No cause, political or otherwise, is worth dying for.

_____ 5. Most American soldiers participated in acts of brutality against Vietnamese civilians.

_____ 6. "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

_____ 7. It is never right to kill another person.

_____ 8. Movies like Rambo are very bad because they show a distorted view of what war is really like and of what it is like to be a soldier.

_____ 9. The men who fought in the Vietnam War did so because they were very patriotic.

_____ 10. "The soldier, above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war."

_____ 11. The Vietnam War was a guerrilla war; therefore, it is under-standable that Vietnamese civilians suffered as a result of American military actions.

_____ 12. People should never compromise their ideals or beliefs.

_____ 13. For soldiers who served in Vietnam, the difference between death and survival often meant not worrying about potential harm to innocent civilians or doing the right or moral thing.

_____ 14. When Vietnam veterans came home from the war, most Americans treated them as returning heroes.

Adapted from Johannessen, Larry R. (1992). *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*. Urbana: NCTE.

Discussion Questions for "Centurion" and "We Have Met the Enemy"

1. How would the narrator and Bates in "Centurion" have reacted had they been in the situation Hucks and Leland were confronted with in "We Have Met the Enemy"?

2. What evidence leads you to your conclusion?

3. How would Hucks and Leland have reacted had they been in the situation the narrator and Bates faced in "Centurion"?

4. What evidence leads you to your conclusion?

5. What is the inevitable outcome in each situation in these stories? Why?

6. What is each author trying to tell us about the Vietnam War and/or war?

Adapted from Johannessen, Larry R. (1992). *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*. Urbana: NCTE.

Vietnam War Writing Assignments

1. **Writing about "Centurion" or "We Have Met the Enemy"**: Write a letter to someone in the class who disagrees with you about O'Brien's stand on one or two of the statements on the opinionnaire. Try to convince this person that he or she is wrong and that your interpretation is correct. Make sure that you use evidence from "Centurion" to support your viewpoint that O'Brien would agree or disagree with a particular statement on the opinionnaire.

Write a letter to someone in the class who disagrees with you about Moore's stand on one or two of the statements on the opinionnaire. Try to convince this person that he or she is wrong and that your interpretation is correct. Make sure that you use evidence from "We Have Met the Enemy" to support your viewpoint that Moore would agree or disagree with a particular statement on the opinionnaire.

2. **Writing about the Vietnam War**: Read the story given to you. Then, write an essay in which you interpret what the author is saying about the Vietnam War. Make sure that you use evidence from the story to support your interpretation of what the author wants readers to understand about the Vietnam War. Also, make sure that you explain how your evidence supports your interpretation of the story.

3. **Writing about/in response to "Centurion" and/or "We Have Met the Enemy"**: Write a composition in which you explain how your opinion has changed and why you have changed your opinion about one or two of the statements on the opinionnaire after reading "Centurion" and/or "We Have Met the Enemy." Make sure that you explain what your opinion was before reading the stories and why, what your opinion is now after reading one or both stories, and provide specific evidence from one or both stories to explain how and why your opinion has changed.

4. **Writing from "Centurion" or "We Have Met the Enemy"**: Write a new scene for "Centurion" or "We Have Met the Enemy." Imagine that the narrator and Bates find themselves in a situation similar to the one Hucks and Leland were confronted with in "We Have Met the Enemy" or Hucks and Leland find themselves in a situation similar to the one the narrator and Bates were confronted with in "Centurion." Describe how the narrator and Bates would have reacted or how Hucks and Leland would have reacted. Will the narrator and Bates kill the shadowy figure that they see run into a cave behind their position? Why or why not? Will Hucks and Leland do more to help the old men than the narrator and Bates did? Why or why not? Make sure that your scene is consistent with how the characters are portrayed in the story and that you have some dialogue between characters.

5. **Writing in response to "Centurion" or "We Have Met the Enemy"**: Write about a time that you or someone you know had to make a difficult choice in which no matter what course of action was taken there would be unpleasant or negative consequences. What was the situation? What choice had to be made? What did you or this person decide to do? Why? In the two stories, the characters have no desire to harm innocent people, and yet they make decisions that result in acts of brutality. In the situation you are writing about, what were the unpleasant or negative consequences of the choice? What did you or this person learn from this experience?

Discussion Questions for "Introduction" and "Initiation: Ask Not": Mark Baker's *NAM: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There*

1. According to the author, what is wrong with the story of Vietnam that has been told so far?

2. How did the author come to write the book? What is most surprising about the author's past? Is it understandable that Vietnam veterans would be wary of him? Why or why not?

3. What warning does Baker give about reading the "war stories" in the book? What does he mean by "the apocryphal aspects have more to do with metaphor than with deceit"?

4. According to the author, why must readers listen to these stories? Why must we deal more honestly and thoroughly with the Vietnam war?

5. Where does the subtitle "Ask Not" come from? Why does Baker use this to introduce this section? Is it meant to be ironic? Why or why not?

6. Where do the people come from (urban cities, suburbs, rural areas) who went to Vietnam? What sorts of backgrounds do they come from? How old are most of the speakers?

7. How did they find their way into the military? What seems to have had an effect on many of them in terms of their reasons for going?

8. What was boot camp like for most of them? Do you think it is good training for Vietnam? Why or why not?

9. How are the experiences described by women in this section different from the experiences described by men? How are they alike?

10. Which of the stories in this section had the most impact on you? Why?

Adapted from Johannessen, Larry R. (1992). *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*. Urbana: NCTE, pp. 69-71.

Small Group Assignment: *NAM*

Directions: As a member of the small group to which you have been assigned, prepare a twenty to twenty-five minute oral presentation that answers the following questions about the section your small group has been assigned. The group may organize answers in any manner desired; however, the questions below should be answered in some fashion. The only other requirement is that all members of the group must participate in the oral presentation. Being absent does not excuse you from your responsibilities. If you fail to show up, the group will have to do it without you. The section assignments are as follows: group #1: "Baptism of Fire," pp. 29-76; group #2: "Grunts," pp. 79-128; group #3: "Martial Arts," pp. 129-164; group #4: "Victors," pp. 167-196; group #5: "Victims," pp. 197-236; group #6: "Homecoming," pp. 239-268; group #7: "Casualties," pp. 269-296.

1. What main points (at least two) does the author make about the subject of this section?

2. What evidence from the speakers in this section support your conclusions from #1, and how does the evidence support them?

3. What else in this section did you find interesting or important? Why?

4. How does the introduction (perhaps including the title) to the section prepare readers for the stories that follow?

5. How would you characterize the experiences described by the speakers? What impact did the experiences described have on the speakers?

6. How are the experiences of women (and/or other minorities) in this section different from the experiences of men who served in Vietnam? How are they alike? What do you conclude from these?

7. What evidence from the speakers in this section support your conclusions from #6, and how does the evidence support them?

8. How does what you learn in this section relate to the book as a whole?

9. Which stories in this section (no more than three) had the most impact on you? Why? **OR,** What did you learn about the Vietnam War from this section that you did not know before reading it?

10. How does what you learn in this section contribute to the historical record of the war? Why? **OR,** How effective is this section as a part of a work of literature? Why?

NAM: Writing Assignments

1. **Writing about *NAM*:** Baker argues that the cumulative effect of the war on the young people who went to Vietnam is that by the time they came home from the war they were "nineteen-year-old bodies with thirty-five-year-old minds." Write an essay in which you explain the most significant experiences that turn these teenagers into "old kids." Make sure that you include evidence from the book to support your points.

2. **Writing about *NAM* as literature and/or history:** You are a member of your school's book selection committee. The committee consists of a member of the school board, a school administrator, a teacher, a parent from the community, and a student. The committee has been asked to decide if Mark Baker's *NAM* should be added to the curriculum. Each member of the committee has been asked to read the book and write a recommendation that will be read by the committee. Write your recommendation to the committee. In writing your recommendation, consider some or all of the following questions: What value might studying this work have? Is this work good literature and/or history? Is it effective? Why or why not? What might students learn from studying this work? How important is what students might learn?

3. **Writing about the Vietnam experience:** Describe one or two aspects of the Vietnam experience, such as the homecoming or the arrival in Vietnam. What was this experience like? What are key features of the experience? Make sure that you include evidence from the book to support your conclusions or generalizations about the aspect(s) of the Vietnam experience that you have chosen.

4. **Writing from *NAM*:** Interview a Vietnam veteran about his or her experiences in the war. Use the information in *NAM* as the basis for your interview. Then, write a composition in which you compare the responses you obtained from the Vietnam veteran to the stories contained in the book. How do your interviewee's experiences compare to those in the book? In what ways are this veteran's experiences typical of those in Baker's book? What is unique about this veteran's experiences?

5. **Writing in response to *NAM*:** Write about a time that you or someone you know had a traumatic experience that made you or this other person old before your time. What was the experience? What thoughts and feelings did you have during and after the experience? In *NAM*, many of the men and women talk about coming face to face with their own mortality or constantly trying to deal with the horrors of the war. In the experience you are writing about, what was it about the experience that made you or this person old before your time? How did you change as a result of the experience?

The Adolescent Experience in Combat Novels of the Vietnam War

1. **The mystique of pre-induction:**
   - What are the main character's attitudes toward war? Patriotism?
   - What is his or her attitude toward the war in Vietnam?
   - What are major influences on the main character's attitudes?
   - Why does he or she decide to go to war?
2. **The initiation into boot camp--the culture of the military:**
   - What difficulties does the main character have adjusting to life in the military? Why?
   - What are significant experiences in recruit training? Why?
   - How does the main character change as a result of recruit training?
   - How does recruit training attempt to prepare young people for the war in Vietnam? Is it effective? Why or why not?
3. **The dislocation of arrival in Vietnam--culture shock:**
   - How does the main character travel to Vietnam?
   - What are his or her initial experiences upon arrival in country?
   - How does he or she react to these experiences?
   - How are the Vietnamese portrayed?
4. **The confrontation with mortality in the first firefight:**
   - How does the main character react the first time in combat?
   - What impact does this experience have on the main character?
   - What are the concerns of the main character and others around him or her?
5. **Consideration:**
   - How and why do the concerns of the main character and others change over time?
   - What is the main character's attitude toward the war, the military, America, and the Vietnamese? How and why has his or her attitude changed?
   - What experiences have had an impact on the main characters? Why?
6. **The phenomenon of coming home:**
   - How does the main character leave Vietnam?
   - What is his or her reaction to leaving?
   - What is the main character's return to the United States like?
   - How has the main character changed?
   - What is his or her attitude toward the war?
7. **Putting It Together: Central Meaning:**
   - What is the author telling readers about the Vietnam War?
   - What is the author saying about war?
   - What is the author saying about courage?

Depending on the particular novel, some or all of the following questions may also be important:

8. **Structure:**
   - How is the novel structured?
   - How does the structure contribute to the meaning?
9. **Style and literary technique:**
   - What is the point of view of the novel? Who is telling the story?
   - Does the point of view change? If so, how?
   - How does the point of view contribute to the meaning?
   - What are major literary techniques the author uses?
   - How do these techniques contribute to the meaning?

Adapted from Johannessen, Larry R. (1992). *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*. Urbana: NCTE.

YA Combat Novels of the Vietnam War: Writing Assignments

1. Writing about the novel: Write an essay in which you interpret what the author is saying about the Vietnam War. Make sure that you use evidence from the novel to support your interpretation of what the author wants readers to understand about the Vietnam War. Also, make sure that you explain how your evidence supports your interpretation of the novel.

2. Writing about the main character: Write an essay in which you explain how the main character changes as a result of his or her experiences. What was the character like before entering the military and going to war? What were his or her values? What was the character like at the end of the novel? How has the character changed? What are his or her values? Has the character grown or matured? What experiences caused these changes? If you do not believe the character changes, how do you account for the way he or she is at the end of the novel? Make sure that you use evidence from the novel to support your analysis of the character and explain how your evidence supports your analysis.

3. Writing about/in response to the novel: Write a composition in which you explain what you learned about the Vietnam War as a result of your study of the novel. Make sure you explain what your opinions and views regarding the Vietnam War were before reading the novel, what your opinions and views are now after reading it, and provide specific evidence from the novel to explain how and why your opinions and views have changed.

4. Writing in response to the novel: The Vietnam War has been called "the war that won't go away": a number of issues such as the POW/MIA's continue to divide the nation; the legacies of the war have a strong impact on the nation's foreign policy decisions; and now the legacies of the war are affecting and will probably continue to affect the children of the Vietnam generation. Write an essay in which you explain why you believe the Vietnam War will not go away. How are the themes, issues, and controversies that are raised in the novel you read (or that you know about from other sources) still with us today? In your opinion, what can be done to help the nation heal the wounds of the war?